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RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA PRIORITY
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J2 SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
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SUBJECT: DEFECTOR RECOUNTS DPRK TORTURE AND "REEDUCATION"

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) North Korean defector Lee Myeong-bok escaped from the DPRK in 1998 was repatriated from China in 2002. He escaped again in 2004 to come to the ROK via Mongolia. In persuading DPRK interrogators that he had contact with neither South Koreans nor missionaries in China -- although he was closely associated with both -- Lee was able to avoid serving in a political prison camp and instead served six months in a labor camp. His account, however, reveals brutal interrogation at DPRK border detention centers prior to making a determination whether a person is a "political" or "economic" defector. Lee's account also contains details regarding the operation of a North Korean pharmaceutical factory and the hazards of crossing into Mongolia from China (a child with whom he was traveling was shot dead by Chinese border guards). END SUMMARY.

DRIVEN TO CHINA BY FAMINE

2. (C) Lee Myeong-bok left Hamheung, North Korea, in 1998 at the age of 15. By that time, the DPRK's public distribution system had completely broken down. Lee, whose parents could not afford to care for him, was left in the care of relatives, who also could not afford to care for him. He decided to set off by himself in search of opportunity and ended up the border city of Hoeryeong. There, learning from border crossers about the material abundance in China, Lee made plans to go to China.

ARRESTED AT THE GATES OF ROK EMBASSY

3. (C) Ethnic Koreans near Shenyang sheltered Lee and introduced him to South Korean missionaries, who became his "adopted parents." Lee spent the next two years in Shenyang and then the following year in Beijing. During this time, Lee studied Chinese and performed odd jobs for spending money. Pretending to be ethnic Korean Chinese, he secured semi-stable employment for eight months working as a delivery-man for a South Korean-owned factory that produced pirated movies and CDs near Beijing. The South Korean life that he saw in the pirated movies and soap operas inspired Lee to move to the ROK. He was also concerned about a possible illegal labor crackdown in the wake of the announcement that Beijing would be host to the 2008 Olympics.

14. (C) With hopes of going to the ROK, Lee in June 2002 entered the ROK Embassy in Beijing by pretending to be a South Korean tourist. When Lee explained that he wanted to go to the ROK, an ROK diplomat told him that he should apply through another country, such as Mongolia or Vietnam. Chinese police arrested Lee when he exited to the street and held him in a Beijing detention center for approximately one month, until authorities had a "full busload" of defectors to repatriate back to the DPRK

TORTURED BY INTERROGATORS IN THE DPRK

15. (C) DPRK authorities interrogated Lee for two months at the Dandong and Sinuiju detention centers. Lee said that they questioned him repeatedly on three issues: whether he had contact with South Koreans or South Korean culture; whether he had contact with missionaries or religious groups; and whether he was just engaged in economic activity in China. Lee thinks that his interrogation period may have been longer than most because he was arrested in front of the ROK Embassy, which provided circumstantial evidence of his attempted defection to the ROK, an act that is defined in the North as "a betrayal of Kim Jong-il." Accordingly, DPRK authorities asked Lee to provide a written statement of his activities in China between 1999 and 2002. Lee maintained that he was just a delivery person for the DVD factory, and denied any contact with South Koreans or missionaries. Lee explained that his entrance into the ROK Embassy was completely unintentional as he was just there to make a delivery.

16. (C) Lee said that he was kept in solitary confinement during his two-month interrogation period. When in his cell,

he would be chained in a half-standing, half-sitting position that made it impossible to sleep. The guards would strictly count out rations of 150 to 160 kernels of rice and 30 beans per day. Guards and interrogators would come at irregular hours to beat and question Lee, comparing his answers under torture with those he provided in his initial written statement. Lee said that he was frequently forced to squat for about one hour with a 5 cm by 10 cm board between his calves and thighs. While squatting, guards would order him to hold his arms out straight in front while they hit him repeatedly in the stomach with a wooden plank.

17. (C) Lee said that he was made to stand approximately five feet away from a wall with his arms spread out "like a plane" and one leg cocked back at the knee. He was made to fall forward, smashing his forehead into the cement wall in front of him. Lee said the guards called this "Wonsan Bombing," after a town that U.S. forces had bombed during the Korean war.

18. (C) Lee said that it was initially relatively easy to endure this treatment because he had been well fed in China. However, after ten days, the pain and fatigue would combine to make a person feel like they had to confess to anything, regardless of whether it was true. Lee told Poloff that he knew of people who made up crimes to confess just to end the torture. Lee said that he persevered through prayer and remembering the missionaries who were kind to him in China. In addition, he knew that if he confessed to any of the "three sins," he would be sent to a political prison camp (kyohwaso). Ultimately, the security agency determined that Lee was an economic migrant and sentenced him to six months of hard labor.

LABOR CAMP

19. (C) As punishment for his "economic defection," Lee was sent to a labor camp near Hamheung, his hometown. Lee explained that the detainees of the labor camp were mostly people convicted of committing social crimes, or defectors guilty of crossing the border for economic reasons. Each administrative district has a local labor camp, which is

responsible for completing most of the difficult, dirty and dangerous (3D) work in the local community.

¶10. (C) Because the objective of the labor camps was to "reeducate" or "resocialize" detainees, daily one-to-two hour sessions of singing and shouting to propaganda themes are included in the schedule. Some propaganda sessions involved collective exercises and singing in the residential areas to set an example for local residents. According to Lee, the food rations at the labor camp were relatively generous and relatives of detainees were allowed to visit each morning to convey packets of food to detained family members. Labor hours usually started at 08:00 and lasted until sunset, with a one-hour lunch break at noon. There were few cases of deaths within the labor camps, as detainees who were sick or too weak to work were allowed to go back to their homes to recover under the condition that they would come back to complete their sentences upon recovery.

PHARMACEUTICAL FACTORY IN HAMHEUNG AND SECOND DEFECTION

¶11. (C) Upon release from the labor camp, Lee worked in a pharmaceutical factory in Hamheung that supplied local residents with basic medicine. Thirty people worked at the factory, but at least two-thirds had second jobs. Every three months, employees would rotate working in the factory and elsewhere, usually as fishermen, where they would contribute a portion of their earnings to purchase the herbs and roots for the medicine that would be produced in the factory. In this way, the factory was able to meet its production quota. In April 2004, Lee left home a second time, following the same train route north that he took in ¶1999. This time, he paid 20,000 won for a train ticket to Hoeryong and another 30,000 won to go to Shenyang, where his "adopted parents," who were back in South Korea at the time, had promised to meet him. Meanwhile, these "parents" hired Chun Ki-won, a well-known South Korean smuggler, to lead Lee to the Mongolian border for 3 million won.

¶12. (C) Lee travelled to Mongolia with 23 other defectors. At the border, Chinese border guards fired at the group, killing a young boy and wounding his father. The 22 were arrested by Chinese authorities, but released to the ROKG after the incident prompted an outcry from the NGO community, said Lee.

A NEW LIFE IN THE ROK

¶13. (C) Lee is now a second-year student at Sogang University's Department of Computer Science. Believing that education is the key to successful adaptation to ROK society, Lee helped found a campus group called "Urihana" or "We are One," which aims to help North Korean university students get acquainted with university life in South Korea. The group's members include both North Korean and South Korean students from Sogang, Yonsei, Hanyang, Chungang University.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) Supporters of engagement with the DPRK sometimes point out that in recent years, North Koreans repatriated from China are no longer routinely sentenced to life terms in political prison camps. Rather, they are sent to a labor camp for several months of "reeducation" and then released. This defector's account corroborates that understanding. However, it also shows the brutal interrogation practices of the DPRK investigators and raises the disturbing question of how many repatriated North Koreans -- and their families -- are sent to political prison camps because they confessed to "crimes" under torture in the border detention areas.

VERSHBOW